New Regal Theater

FORMERLY THE
AVALON THEATER

1641-59 EAST 79TH STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF
SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON
CHICAGO LANDMARKS

FEBRUARY, 1989

NEW REGAL THEATER
1641-59 East 79th Street
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1926-27

Architect: John Eberson

The motion picture palace was a unique architectural statement, a response to the economic expansion, technological innovations, and conservative tastes of its era. The architects of the movie palaces created a singularly American and seemingly contradictory building type, one that combined aristocratic style with a popular, egalitarian use, that integrated commercial activity, material elegance, and fantasy, with escapism, and that employed modern building techniques to produce an illusion of historic grandeur. At once ornate, gaudy, garish, and magnificent, the movie palace was a monumental architectural statement of a period when popular taste was identified with novel reinterpretations of archaic motifs. The New Regal Theater, originally known as the Avalon Theater, exemplifies this building type. In the design of the New Regal, the concept of stylistic revisionism, characterized by Middle Eastern design elements, was carried to a radical conclusion boldly successful within its historic context.

The first movie houses were family-owned storefront operations, known as nickelodeons after the common price of admission, that made use of whatever rudimentary projection equipment and seating were available. In spite of unsophisticated surroundings and presentations, the audience for the one- and two-reel short subject films produced at the time grew at a rapid pace. The commercial success of the first feature-length film, *The Great Train Robbery*, made in 1903, marked the beginning of a period of expansion in the film industry that effected the scale of its products, audiences, and venues and contined until the Great Depression.

Local cinema operators in the early 1900s sought larger venues to accommodate their growing audience, but they were not yet in the financial position to build new structures for the purpose of film presentation. The short term answer to this problem was to gain

entry to the neighborhood vaudeville houses and union, ethnic, and fraternal halls as second billing to live stage performances. Established neighborhood theaters, such as Thalia Hall in Chicago's Pilsen community, merely added the movies to their list of public activities and entertainments, which already included plays, political rallies, vaudeville, and social meetings. By the end of the First World War movies were sharing top billing with live entertainments, and theaters would continue to present local and touring live acts with movies throughout the silent film era. By 1915, the continuing increase in the size of the paying audience and the growing sophistication of cinematic presentations created a demand for a larger and more specialized building that would include permanent projection facilities. While older auditoria, including Thalia Hall, were altered to allow for a fire-proof projection booth and to accommodate crowds more comfortably, theater operators also began to build new buildings that would have, from their inception, adequate facilities for both stage and screen presentations.

Although the movies had graduated from the storefront to the neighborhood hall, their association with vaudeville and other popular entertainments, and the often less than sophisticated screenplays and acting they demonstrated when compared with professional theater, contributed to an attitude that the cinema was not a form of entertainment fit for a serious venue. This prejudice excluded film from the halls with the largest capacity, those built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for symphonic orchestras, the opera, and other cultural institutions. It was this building type, however, that provided the theater operators and their architects with a prototype to meet their demands for large-scale presentations of comedy, vaudeville, live music, and film. What became known as the "movie palace" was an attempt to lend a veneer of culture to a new, historically unprecedented scale and medium of popular entertainment.

The first movie palaces, dating from roughly 1915 onward, demonstrated the restrained classicism of the Beaux-Arts tradition. In emulation of the cultural institutions that were their prototypes, these early palaces exemplified by the Chicago Theater, used high style ornamentation in a sober manner, with particular emphasis on the grand spaces and delicate ornament of the interiors of the lobbies and auditoria. By the middle of the 1920s, however, a trend toward eclectic combinations of historic architectural styles became evident in movie palace design. Borrowing initially from the exuberant details of the Baroque, the palace architects began exploring various styles, extending the variety of forms to the most ancient and geographically remote forms described in their style books. This process was aided to no small extent by the subjects presented in contemporary movies, which often were set in exotic locations, with romanticized heros and heroines engaged in melodramatic narratives. The concept of the movie palace, and particularly its interior, was transformed by the intention to create an environment of fantastic illusion for its patrons. The interior of the theater became an extension of the film, a stage with props fully in the round, that served as an essential part of the movie-going experience.

The career of the architect John Eberson is of essential importance in the history of the movie palace. The transitions in size, scale, design, and stylistic application he employed on a large number of theaters from the early teens through the early 1930s pro-

vide a chronology of movie palace design variations from the inception of the type to its demise.

Architect John Eberson was born in Vienna, Austria, probably in 1875. He studied architecture in Vienna and Dresden before emigrating to the United States in the first years of the new century and settling in Texas. In 1915, he became the architect for the Hoblitzelle theater chain which was presenting live and film entertainments on stages in Texas and neighboring states. His early theater designs were conservative, in keeping with the tradition of classically-inspired facades, interiors, and ornament. A prolific worker, he earned the nickname "Opera House John" in the Southwest before he came to wide reknown.

Eberson's design for the Hoblitzelle Majestic Theater in Houston, built in 1923 and no longer standing, was an attempt to realize a novel solution to the interior of the theater auditorium. Using the concept of an outdoor stage set in an Italian garden, he created the illusion of a park-like space surrounded by buildings that were realized, in part, in three dimensions. The whole was covered, not by an elaborately detailed dome, but by a night sky, rendered by a plaster arch painted deep blue and studded with twinkling electric lights in imitation of the stars. The effect was made convincing by the inclusion of imitation trees, vines, and figurative sculpture on and behind the walls by the use of stuffed birds, seated on the walls and suspended from the ceiling, and by the use of a projector which simulated the movement of clouds across the star-covered ceiling. Eberson referred to this design as an "atmospheric" theater, a term that was intended to communicate a sense of the exotic as well as of the out-of-doors.

The Houston Majestic was an immediate sensation, popular with the theater-going public and particularly with its owners. The atmospheric design reduced construction costs and the amount of time needed for interior detailing, and saved on maintenance costs for its operators. Over the next eight years Eberson would design atmospheric theaters throughout the United States and one in Paris, and he became known as one of the handful of prominent contemporary theater architects in the country.

That Eberson, an Austrian-born and -trained architect, came up with the atmospheric design concept was no coincidence. His designs are clearly related to the *trompe l'oeil* dome treatments, first seen in seventeenth century churches in Rome, that were widely popular in Austria and Germany during the later Baroque era. In these churches, the ceiling fresco gives the observer the impression that the roof of the building is open to a celestial vision of saints and angels, who spiral in flight through a cloud-filled radiant sky. The image is a perspective extension of the lines established by the piers and engaged columns of the interior into an imaginary heavenly space. The point where the structure of the wall meets that of the vaults is wholly obscured, enhancing the illusion of an infinite space that arches over the congregation to present a vision of heavenly glory.

Eberson has secularized this concept, eliminating the heavenly host and limiting his celestial vision to that which is obvious from nature. The religious drama and rapture of

his Baroque prototype was abandoned in favor of the relative calm of exotic yet familiar motifs. Believing that variety in stylistic design was of primary importance in public spaces, he would not create symmetrical interior elevations, and he refused to repeat already completed designs for new clients. By using many styles for inspiration, including ancient Greek and Roman, Italian, Spanish Colonial, and Moorish, he and his firm continued to design each building as an unique structure. In order to insure a dependable supply of the decorative sculpture and architectural details in plaster of which his interiors were made, Eberson founded Michelangelo Studios. Ownership of this contracting firm gave him control over the realization of his work, from the execution of details to their packing, shipping, and installation.

The National Theater Corporation hired Eberson to execute a theater at 1641-59 East 79th Street in Chicago late in 1925. The neighborhood in which it was to be built was known as Avalon Park, after the island paradise that was the mythical final destination of the heroes of Arthurian legends. Although the name "Avalon" could have suggested a romantic subject based on the legends of King Arthur, the architect Eberson took his inspiration from another source. While shopping in the French Quarter of New Orleans earlier that year, Eberson found a Persian incense burner in a Royal Street antique store. The incense burner has been described as an intricate piece of metalwork, encrusted with jewels and caligraphic ornamentation.

Enamored with this find, Eberson extrapolated from it to create the design of the theater. The exterior of the Avalon is dominated by the profile of its minarets and dome (Figure 1). The brick walls of the auditorium are articulated by banded rustication, pointed arches, and decorative patterns in various colors. The main entrance is framed by two minarets and topped by a massive wall of intricately decorated terra cotta (Figure 2). The patterns in this polychrome treatment, manufactured by the American Terra Cotta Company of Crystal Lake, Illinois, were modeled after the intricate, non-figurative designs that are characteristic of Islamic ornament (Figures 3 and 4).

The theme of Middle Eastern-inspired design was continued on the interior, articulated by a multicolored variety of tile, marble, plaster, and glass details. In the lobby, three carved and painted wood murals set in massive arches were installed on the west wall, depicting people and animals in idyllic Persian royal gardens. The ceiling was designed after an oriental rug, rendered in painted plaster and inlaid with gems of cut glass. The entrances to the auditorium were located on the west wall, where staircases carried traffic to the balcony above and to the lounges below which were designed respectively after a harem parlor for women and as a caliph's den for men.

The walls of the interior of the auditorium present two distinct and unique elevations. The south wall, on the right side of the house when facing the stage, was modeled after the walls of a garden with a series of arches at its base. One of these housed a reflecting pool, in which stood three stuffed flamingos, and the arch nearest the stage was barred by heavy gates, restricting access to an imaginary sacred courtyard beyond. The north wall, on the left when facing the stage, was designed in imitation of a palace, accented with a

dome and flanked by minarets. Decorative grills fill the arches atop the palace wall, and the series of open arches on the level of the auditorium floor function as niches, one of which included a large Pilgrim's Fountain (Figure 5). The fountain originally operated during performances; however, the continuous interruptions caused by the subliminal suggestion it gave to those seated on the left side of the house made it a nuisance, and it was shut off at an early date. The walls on both sides were decorated with imitation trees and and vines, and stuffed birds and ceramic cheetahs were placed on their false balconies and parapets.

The proscenium arch was formed by a fortified wall, topped with a cloth canopy suspended on spears, that has been cut open by a monumental pointed arch to reveal the stage. As in all of Eberson's atmospheric theaters, the ceiling of the auditorium was rendered as a night sky, studded with many small electric lights.

The Avalon Theater opened on August 29, 1927, with a live musical presentation titled *Dreams of Araby*, performed by Buddy Fisher and His Band, along with the Paramount Pictures production of *Soft Cushions*, starring Douglas MacLean and "Chicago's Own" Sue Carol. Its ushers guided patrons through the 2,300 seat facility in uniforms modeled after those worn by the French Foreign Legion, with the notable addition of plumed hats.

Within a few years, the atmospheric style that was dramatically demonstrated by Eberson in the Avalon and other theaters had gone out of popular favor. Although the number of theater commissions he received shrank markedly, he continued to concentrate on the problems of large scale buildings for public use and spent the last years of his career designing shopping malls. Eberson died in Michigan in 1954. According to his son, Drew Eberson, the Avalon was among the architect's favorite projects because of the source of its concept, the incense burner, and due to the degree of pleasure and satisfaction it provided him during its realization.

Like many other theaters of the period, the Avalon discontinued live performances in the late 1930s, concentrating exclusively on motion picture presentation. It continued to operate as a movie theater until 1970 when it went through a series of owners who used it as a public meeting hall and as a church.

Four miles north and one mile west of the Avalon Theater, a similar structure was under construction during 1927. By this time the commercial center of Chicago's black community was shifting from the area of State and 35th Street to South Parkway, now King Drive, and 47th Street. A major element in the redevelopment of this area was the original Regal Theater, built at 4719-27 South Parkway by the National Theater Corporation. One of the first theaters in the country built expressly to cater to the black community, it was constructed and furnished for $1.5 million and opened its doors on February 4, 1928 as a theater for the presentation of live acts and films. It had a Spanish Baroque-revival facade design, and the interior was articulated with a mixture of Spanish and Moorish ornament. Considered a semi-atmospheric design, its auditorium ceiling was given

the shape of the underside of an Arabian tent, with sky and distant castles visible through openings in the fabric. Among its original features were a Barton house organ, a 22-piece jazz band, and the "Regalettes" chorus line.

National Theater Corporation sold the Regal to the Balaban & Katz theater chain in 1931. It was under their ownership that Ken Blewett, a Kentucky native who had started at the Regal as an usher in 1929, earned the position of manager of the theater in 1939. Blewett was the first black to manage a house for Balaban & Katz, and he held his position at the Regal until 1959. In spite of the trend away from live acts with the demise of vaudeville and the dominance of the "talkies," Blewett insisted on continuing the Regal's tradition of presenting live entertainment. Largely due to his efforts, a partial list of those who performed at the Regal is a chronology of popular musical acts from the 1930s to the 1970s: the Mills Brothers, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, The Ink Spots, Count Basie, Woody Herman, Nat 'King' Cole, Tony Bennett, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Moms Mabley, Lena Horne, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, B.B. King, Buddy Rich, James Brown, Stevie Wonder, and the Jackson Five. The high quality of its bookings made the Regal a nationally prominent center of jazz music and of black music and entertainment. The Regal predated the Apollo Theater in New York and held twice the number of patrons. It was also the setting for a number of live recordings, such as *Moms Mabley Live at the Regal*, released by Chicago's Chess Records Company.

The Regal came under black ownership for the first time in 1961 when S.B. Fuller purchased it from the Englestein Company. However, due to financial problems and a changing entertainment market, Fuller lost the Regal in 1968. No longer considered to be a viable economic venture, the original Regal Theater was demolished in 1973.

In 1985, a development group headed by Edward and Bettiann Gardner, owners of Soft Sheen Products, Incorporated, a Chicago-based personal products manufacturer, bought the Avalon Theater from the R. W. Schambach Ministries of Tyler, Texas. Recalling the legacy of the original Regal Theater as a center for the performing arts in the black community, the group announced a $9.6 million plan to renovate the Avalon and rename it the New Regal Theater. With this announcement, the group expressed its intent to create an entertainment facility in the likeness of the original Regal, making use of a building that was contemporary with and stylistically similar to the original. The renovation was executed by the architectural firm of D'Escoto, Incorporated, with the assistance of the Conrad Schmitt Studios, specialists in historic restoration. Reincarnated as the New Regal, the renovated theater was reopened as a performing arts center in October, 1987. Operated by the not-for-profit New Regal Theater Foundation, it continues to provide a venue for performance artists in the heritage of its namesake.

As an architectural statement of contemporary popular culture, the movie palace was an unprecedented phenomenon. The monumental scale of the theaters, the technical sophistication of motion picture presentation, and the size of the budgets necessary for both would have been unimaginable a generation earlier. Over a period of more than fifteen years this unique. The architects who designed these buildings made use of every

known historic architectural style and created innumerable combinations and variations based on them. Over a period of no more than fifteen years this building type evolved, matured and was eclipsed. The romantic attitude that was forcefully demonstrated in the styles of these buildings extended as well to the narratives of the movies presented in them. The theater and the film came to be considered inseparable parts of a complete presentation that was meant to give its patrons a reprieve from their daily concerns through fantasy. That Eberson shared these sentiments was emphasized in his written comments regarding the design of the Avalon Theater:

> It is here that the Royal nabobs and lords gather to barter and to exchange everything from fruit to human souls. . . . Behold the water carriers pause for a short siesta in the heat of the day to gaze in the pool of the Bridal Fountain. . . . The beholding of such scenes inspired the work which led to the creation of the sweet and mysterious interior of the Avalon Theater.

The questions that Eberson and his contemporary architects addressed had to do with the invention of illusions that would induce theater patrons to temporarily suspend their belief in their sense of time and place, to inspire fantasies of the distant and exotic. Eberson's greatest contribution, exemplified by the Avalon Theater, was in the invention of the atmospheric auditorium, a reinterpretation of a traditional religious form for a novel and secular, yet romantic environment. The renovation of the building and its new identity as the New Regal Theater is evidence of the continuing tradition of popular affection held for these buildings.

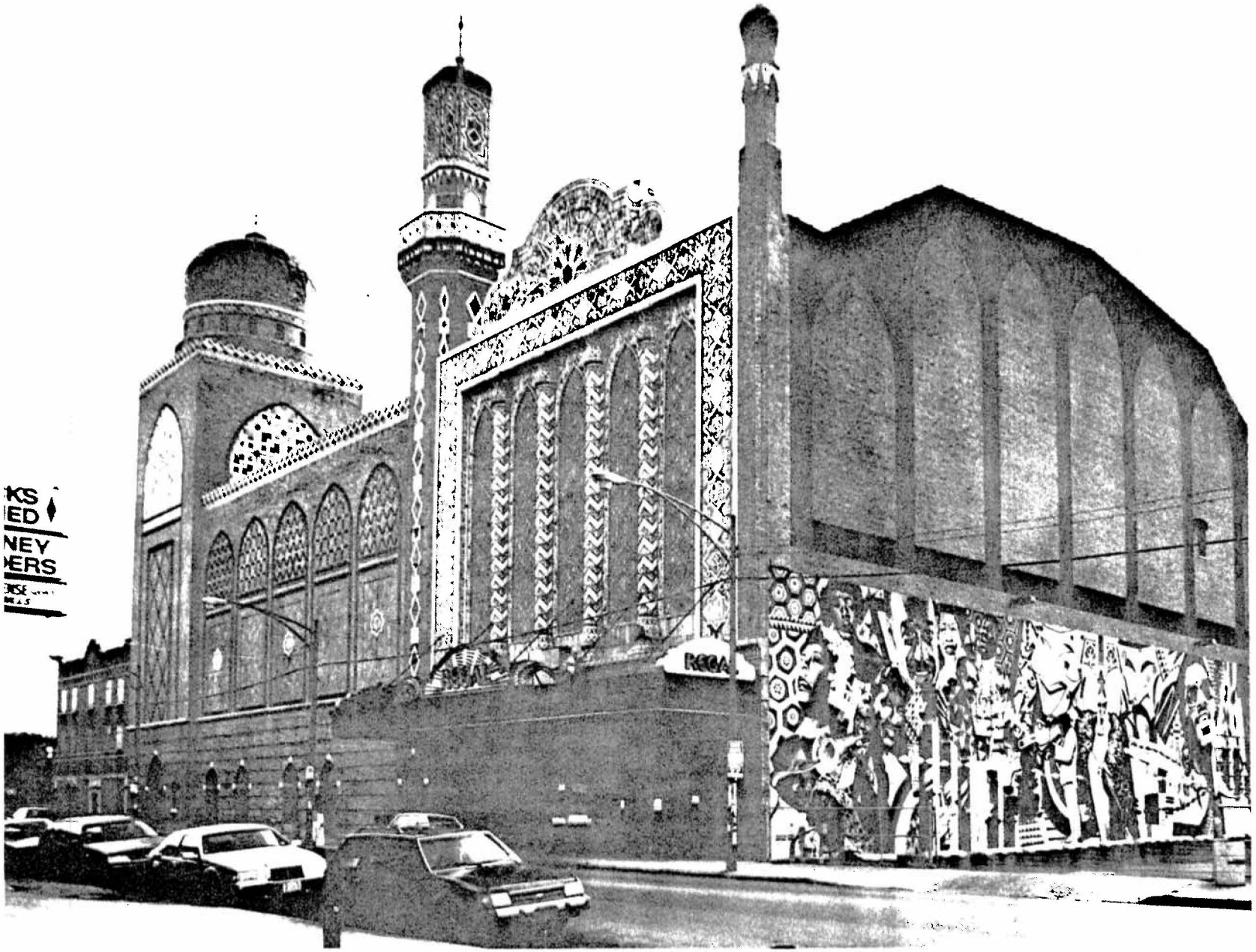

Figure 2: The main entrance to the New Regal Theater. The size of the ornamental terra-cotta facade corresponds with that of the lobby on the interior.

(Photograph by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

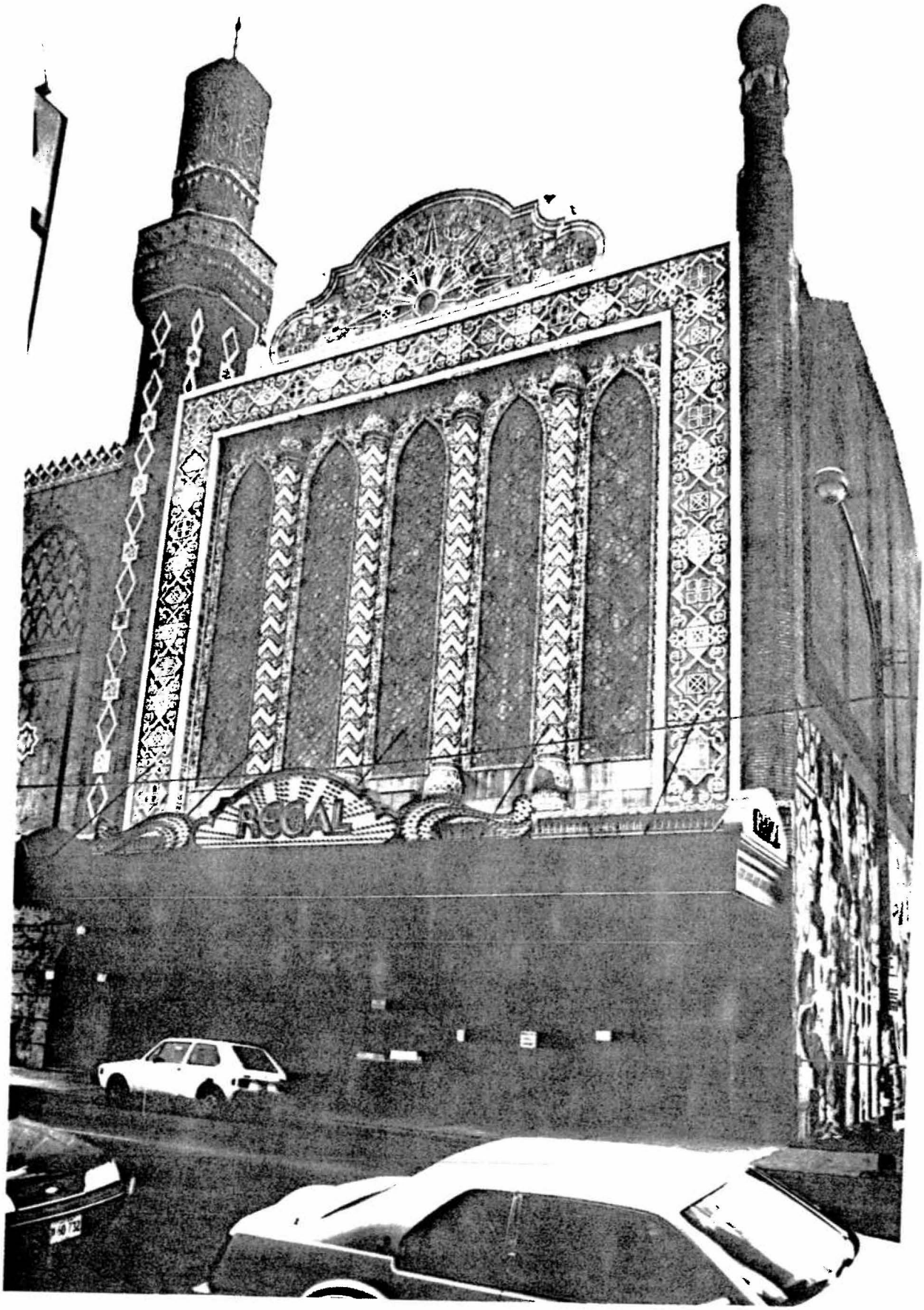
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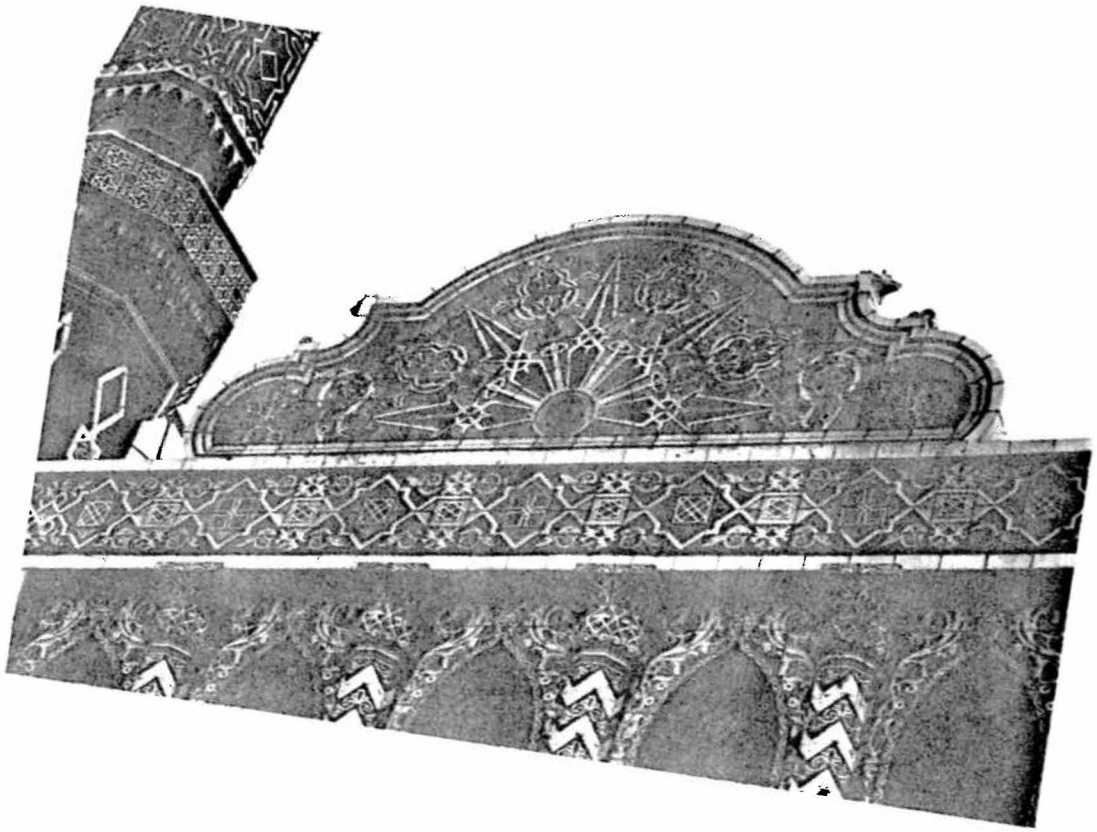
Figure 3: Detail of the terra-cotta ornament of the parapet and one of the minarets. The design of the ornament was derived from the intricate, non-representational patterns that characterize Islamic decoration.

(Photography by Timothy N. Wittman for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

Figure 4: Detail of the dome atop the tower at the northeast corner of the New Regal, rendered in terra cotta.

(Photograph by Raymond T. Tatum for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)



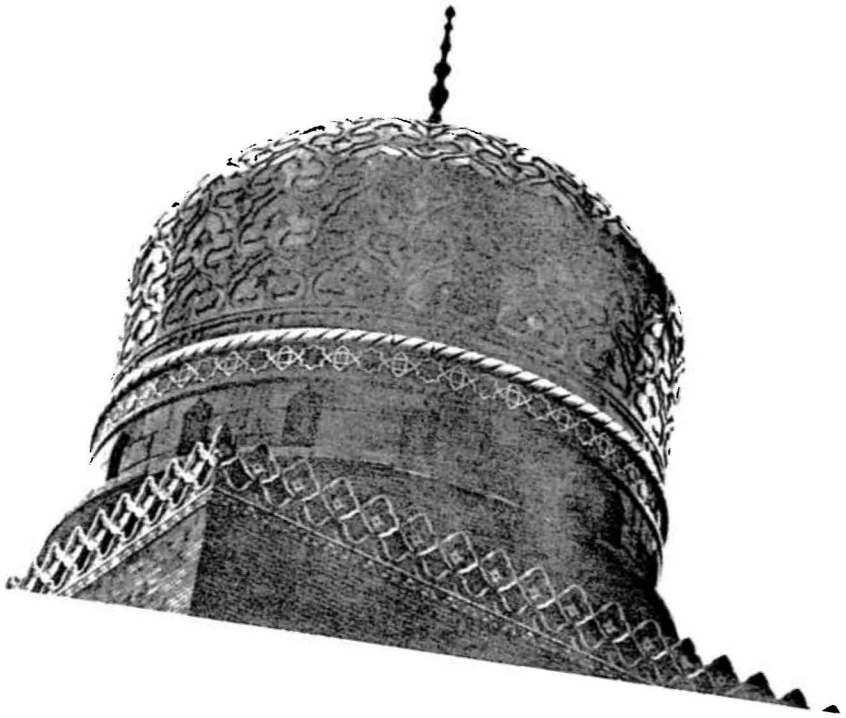
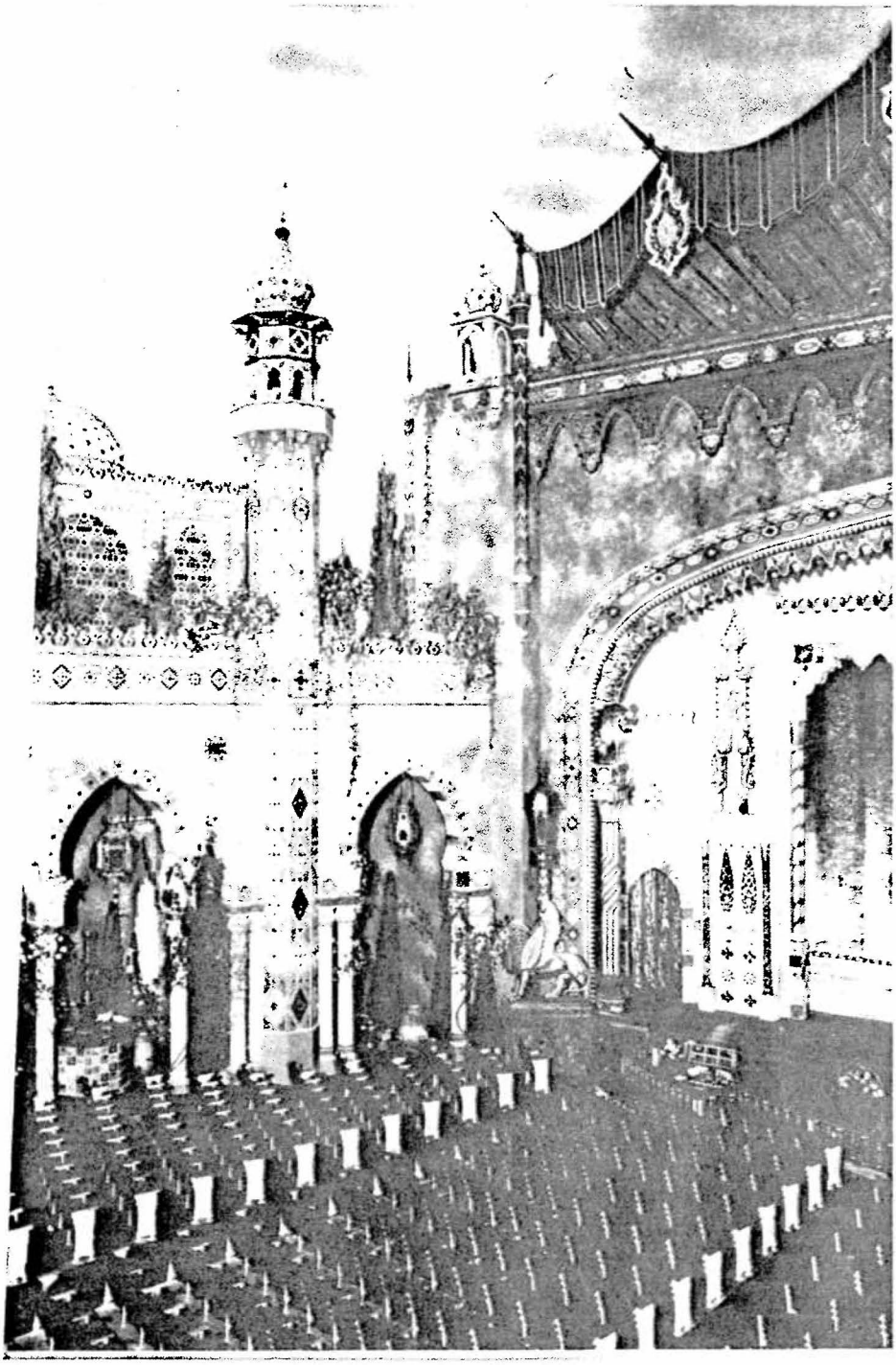


Figure 5: View of the interior of the New Regal Theater auditorium. The Pilgrim's Fountain is located under the arch on the left.

(Reproduced from *American Picture Palaces* by David Naylor. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981, p. 77.)



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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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